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Journalist uses FOIA to uncover 'Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor'

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SAN FRANCISCO — A 1940 memo explaining how to provoke Japan into an overt act of war — recommendations that President Franklin D. Roosevelt followed — and radio communications tracking the Japanese fleet to Pearl Harbor might never have been discovered without the persistence of an Oakland, Calif., journalist and the Freedom of Information Act.



Robert B. Stinnett, who retired from *The Oakland Tribune* in 1986 to pursue this story, laid out the details, document by document, in his book, *Day of Deceit: The Truth About FDR and Pearl Harbor*. He discussed what he found and how he found it during an Author Series program last night at the Pacific Coast Center.

Robert B. Stinnett

Stinnett served in the Navy under Lt. George Bush from 1942 to 1946. In 1982, he read the book *At Dawn We Slept*, which mentioned an encryption center at Pearl Harbor. "In the Navy in World War II, we were never told about communications. We were told that a submarine spotted the Japanese fleet."

He sent in a Freedom of Information Act application to visit the encryption center to do a story for his newspaper for the anniversary of the Dec. 7, 1941, bombing. When he got to Pearl Harbor, he met cryptographers "who started me on the search." He came home and filed more FOIA applications to get naval intelligence records. "I asked for everything pertaining to Pearl Harbor. I got nowhere with the Navy.

"In 1990, I sensed a change and learned that the Navy was going to release documents through the National Archives," he said. About a million documents were shipped from a vault in Indiana, processed by the archives, and the first 6,000 documents were sent to Stinnett. In boxes. With no index.

As Stinnett worked his way page by page through the boxes, he came across something unexpected: a memorandum written by Lt. Cmdr. Arthur H. McCollum, who felt that war with Japan was inevitable and should be provoked "at a time which suited U.S. interests." McCollum laid out recommendations for the United States that he believed would cause the Japanese to commit an overt act of war.

Stinnett took the 135 audience members through those recommendations:

Make an arrangement with Britain for the use of British bases in the Pacific, particularly Singapore.

Make an arrangement with Holland for the use of base facilities and acquisition of supplies in the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia).

Give all possible aid to the Chinese government of Chiang

Kai-shek.

Send a division of long-range heavy cruisers to the western Pacific, the Philippines and Singapore.

Send two divisions of submarines to the western Pacific.

Keep the main strength of the U.S. fleet, now in the Pacific, in the vicinity of the Hawaiian Islands.

Insist that the Dutch refuse to grant Japanese demands for undue economic concessions, particularly oil.

Completely embargo all trade with Japan, in collaboration with a similar embargo imposed by the British Empire.

The memo was sent to Navy Capts. Walter S. Anderson and Dudley W. Knox, two of Roosevelt's most trusted military advisers. In his book, Stinnett writes: "A series of secret presidential routing logs plus collateral intelligence information in Navy files offer conclusive evidence that they did see it. Beginning the very next day, with FDR's involvement, McCollum's proposals were systematically put into effect."

The reason, Stinnett said yesterday, is that "80 percent of the American people were against the U.S. entering the war." Mothers of sons lost in World War I "were marching against sending American boys into Europe's war. That's why Commander McCollum came up with the plan for an overt act of war, and Commander McCollum was right. The unification (after the Dec. 7 bombing of Pearl Harbor) was instant."

Stinnett discovered in his research that the United States had cracked Japanese codes thanks to Agnes Meyer Driscoll, the Navy's chief civilian cryptanalyst. Her knowledge of codes "began in 1920 in a Shakespeare commune in Geneva, Ill., where they were trying to discover if Shakespeare's work was actually written by Francis Bacon." Her skill made it possible for the United States to decode Japanese military messages as early as October 1940. The United States knew in November 1940, for example, that Isoroku Yamamoto had been promoted to admiral and had immediately begun to plan the attack on Pearl Harbor. On Nov. 5, 1941, a decoded message from the Japanese naval ministry to the Japanese fleet said they expected war with the United States to begin in the first week of December.

On Nov. 15, 1941, Gen. George Marshall invited to a secret press briefing representatives from *The New York Times*, *New York Herald Tribune*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, the Associated Press, United Press and International News Service. Marshall told them in confidence that the U.S. had cracked the Japanese codes and that war would break out between the U.S. and Japan during the first 10 days of December.

Meanwhile, radio communications tracked the Japanese as they made their way to Pearl Harbor and to the Philippines. Navy officials declared the North Pacific Ocean a "Vacant Sea" and ordered all U.S. and allied shipping out of those waters. A lot of people in the military and the administration knew what was happening, with two exceptions: Adm. Husband E. Kimmel and Gen. Walter Short, the two in charge of military operations at Pearl Harbor, who were kept ignorant of all those months of intercepted messages.

Stinnett also learned that the Japanese had a spy in Honolulu in 1941 and that the Federal Bureau of Investigation was keeping tabs on him. Stinnett sent an FOIA request to the FBI for those records and was turned down.

"But J. Edgar Hoover had sent copies of the documents to the State Department, which gave me the documents with no black-outs," Stinnett said. "If you can't get in the front door, go in the side door or back door, but get the information."

The writer said that, as he has appeared at the book gatherings and told the story, people have expressed shock and disbelief that Roosevelt would knowingly put the U.S. military and civilians in harm's way. Stinnett doesn't condemn FDR for his actions, saying it took a strong leader to make that kind of decision, which was regarded as necessary.

That kind of act was not confined to FDR and World War II, Stinnett said. It occurred at the Gulf of Tonkin in the Vietnam War, in the Civil War and in the U.S.-Mexico war. According to historians, "those provocations probably go back to Julius Caesar."

Stinnett does, however, criticize the secrecy that kept Americans in the dark for 60 years about what their government did and unfairly left Kimmel and Short in disgrace.

"It's 60 years later and I still haven't seen all the records," he said.

Stinnett stressed that the FOIA belongs to everyone, not just journalists, and Americans should make good use of it. "But it's important to say Freedom of Information Act. That gets their (government officials') attention."

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